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# Faith-based climate action in Christian congregations: mobilisation and spiritual resources

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explain how and why church congregations mobilise on environmental issues and what – if anything – is distinctive about that mobilisation. Building on and adapting Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT), we develop the idea of “spiritual resources” to help explain how a collection of spiritual identities, values, symbols and narratives can facilitate distinctive collective action on environmental issues. Our analysis draws on data derived from an in-depth case study of climate active groups in Scotland. It includes content analysis of websites, news stories as well as ethnographic observation of selected church and secular groups engaged in climate activity. We find church groups do enjoy a distinct set of resources – comprising tradition, rituals and symbols shaped by theology and doctrine – which are not wholly captured by other explanations of climate mobilisation. While these spiritual resources do not directly translate into specific environmental or climate action they can, especially when combined with other resources, lead to environmental activities distinctly motivated, and distinctly practised at the individual and community level.

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Resource Mobilisation Theory; spiritual resources; community; faith-based; climate change

## 1. Introduction

The phrase “environmental action” may conjure up images of seasoned protesters camping out to protest airport runways, mass demonstrations demanding climate action or the high visibility actions of Greenpeace. But a growing number of other, less obvious actors have mobilised around environmental issues, especially climate change. One of the most striking developments is the growing presence and activity of faith-based actors such as church groups, eco-congregations or faith coalitions. Scholars have sought to explain this increased faith-based activity using various approaches and methods. Religious studies scholars of Christian groups have studied the biblical basis for environmental action, engaging in debates on the meaning of “dominion” or “stewardship” (DeLashmutt 2011; Kearns 2011). Political scientists have most often explored the relationship between religious organisation membership and voting (Wood 1994), or have used quantitative surveys to link religious beliefs to attitudes towards the environment or the climate (Wardekker, Petersen, and van der Sluijs 2009; Clements, Xiao, and McCright 2014; Morrison, Duncan, and Parton 2015). Sociology of religion scholars, as well as some geographers, have examined the social structure of religion or the role of religious perceptions and practices (Ferguson and Tambur-ello 2015; Taylor 2015; Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016; Raufirad et al. 2017).

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This paper builds on that rich literature to help explain and characterise the growing involvement of Christian church groups. It supplements religious scholarship by borrowing from a strain of social movement theory – Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) – which focuses on how groups identify and exploit resources (financial, human, organisational, cultural) to recruit adherents, sustain action and navigate political environments (see McCarthy and Zald 2001; Walder 2009, 292; Edwards and Kane 2014). While this approach is not normally applied to religious groups,<sup>1</sup> we adapt it to help explain how and why church communities mobilise locally on environmental issues, and what – if anything – is distinctive about that mobilisation. Our main adaptation of the framework is the identification and exploration of a particular set of cultural resources linked to faith, inner belief and transcendence – what we call here *spiritual resources*.

To address the second question – what might be distinctive about this mobilisation – we compare the resources of church groups with secular groups also active in the area of environment and climate change. The latter include environmental NGOs but also Transition Towns engaging in locally based climate action. Our primary focus is on activity in Scotland, but we also draw on documents and activities from UK-wide and international organisations. The investigation reveals several resources available to the church groups studied. We do not argue that belonging to a faith-based group is *intrinsically* “climate-mobilising” but do identify a distinctive set of resources – drawing on powerful cultural understandings linked to faith – which can serve as a potent resource for political mobilisation on climate and the environment.

The next section introduces in more detail the framework applied and the methodology employed. Section 3 compares the “traditional” resources (material, human, organisational) of religious and secular groups and how they shape mobilisation on environmental issues with a particular focus on climate change. Section 4 is devoted to an analysis of spiritual resources and what makes them distinct. Section 5 summarises the findings, their implications, and offers suggestions for further research.

## 2. Framework and methodology

### 2.1. Resource Mobilisation Theory

RMT is concerned with how and why groups mobilise around a problem or issue.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other social movement frameworks, RMT is less concerned with the nature of a movement’s grievances or demands, and more with explaining how and why a group galvanises to pursue their collective goals (Pinard 2011, 11; Tarrow 2011). Early RMT scholars identified different categories of resources exploited by groups which allow such action to develop and thrive. These include material resources (such as funding, donations or land), human resources (staff, expertise, leadership skills of members) and organisational resources (including network links) (Zald and McCarthy 1987). Later theorists moved beyond material resources to identify a less tangible set of resources, often referred to as cultural resources. These include a group’s values (Canel 1997; Walder 2009) a shared sense of identity (Gamson 1992; Bomberg and McEwen 2012) or cultural symbols (images, tropes) that embody, orient and facilitate shared group experiences (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Edwards and Kane 2014, 215).<sup>3</sup> Sociology of religion scholars, while not using the term resources, have also identified distinctive values and attributes possessed by religious communities engaging in social issues. Gardner (2010) focus on religious organisations’ “assets” which include material resources and community-building capacity. Stark and Finke (2000) refer to “religious capital” which they define as the mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture; Smith (1996) discusses “religious assets” such as transcendent motivation, shared identity and a privileged legitimacy (see also Iannaccone 1990; Smidt 2003; Baker and Skinner 2006).<sup>4</sup> Where relevant we draw on these writings to adapt and strengthen the RMT framework.

### 2.2. Spiritual resources

In this paper, we shall identify and explore a set of cultural resources we label “spiritual resources.” These are defined as *the collection of spiritual beliefs, symbols and identities that facilitate collective*

*action on specific issues.* Although “**spiritual**” is a highly ambiguous term (Kourie 2007; Sheldrake 2016), it is often defined in broad, experiential terms, referring to an inner relationship with a loving, guiding higher power or being (Zinnbauer et al. 1997; see also Hill et al. 2000). Core to the notion is a sense of “profound interconnection” (McIntosh 2008), a “divine transcendence” (Mercadante 2014) beyond the everyday, and a sense that humans serve a purpose beyond the corporal. While focusing on inner belief, spirituality has significant implications for outward behaviour (Holder 2005). McIntosh (2008, 203) notes how it challenges selfishness; it can “carry us deeper than mere ethics and any notion of moral law,” taking us “to the very source of conviction and motivation in the core of our being.” Spirituality – and the beliefs, symbols that accompany it – can thus act as a potentially powerful resource for mobilisation.

This paper narrows the broad meaning of “spirituality” in two ways. We acknowledge that spirituality is much wider than religion. The latter is best understood as a social structure onto which spirituality is harnessed.<sup>5</sup> But in this paper we focus on the spirituality of religious actors only. To narrow the scope further we pay **specific** attention to Christian spirituality, focusing particularly on the tradition, rituals and symbols of Christian theology and doctrine. Christian spirituality is described as a creative, dynamic synthesis of faith and life, and, more specifically, the “desire to live out the Christian faith authentically, responsibly, effectively and fully” (McGrath 1999, 9). In these and other definitions (Principe 2000; Sheldrake 2016), we see Christian spirituality as encompassing a set of beliefs, values and practices of the Christian faith as derived from teachings of the Bible. (These values and practices, including hope, redemption, awe, humility and love of others will be discussed below.) In sum, this study is interested in specific religious communities – Christian congregations in Scotland – and explores the extent to which their Christian spirituality provides an additional and/or distinctive mobilisation resource.

### 2.3. Comparative method and data collection

To explain and characterise the growing mobilisation of church groups, we focus on Christian communities engaged with climate change in Scotland and broader networks in the UK. We examine a cross section of church congregations particularly active in climate and environmental issues, with an in-depth study of six such groups. These congregations are our main focus but we also studied the wider networks in which these churches are embedded. These include Eco-Congregation Scotland, a non-denominational network of churches in Scotland taking action on environmental issues, as well as three UK-wide Christian organisations Operation Noah, Christian Aid and A Rocha.<sup>6</sup> For each we identified the resources which have enabled these actors to mobilise and take action on environmental issues. To tease out what if anything was distinctive about church groups we compared their resources and mobilisation to that of secular climate active groups also active in Scotland. Secular groups include Friends of the Earth Scotland, People and Planet, WWF Scotland and Transition Scotland. To make the study manageable, we focus on these groups’ specific mobilisation surrounding climate change, especially climate agreements and campaigns.

Data on these actors was derived from several sources, beginning with **website and documentary analysis** of each of the actors listed above. We analysed first the webpages and relevant documents of each organisation to identify key themes and motivations linked to environment and climate action. We then used Nexis® to identify and examine **21 news stories** featuring our chosen groups and their activities surrounding a key milestone event, the Paris UN climate talks in 2015. The news analysis allowed us to identify further the key values expressed, their characterisation of climate change and their climate activities. Our third step enabled us to make more specific comparisons: web pages with references to climate were manually coded (simple hierarchical coding) four times between 2014 and 2016 to identify key themes linked to core beliefs surrounding the causes, characteristics of and possible responses to climate change. We provide a visual depiction of emergent key themes in Section 4. Finally, we drew on **interviews and ethnographic observation**: we conducted closer documentary study and interviews with key actors in six eco-

congregations, three Transition groups and three environmental NGO groups in Edinburgh, Linlithgow, St Andrews and Stirling.<sup>7</sup> Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study. These observations and interviews have not been formally coded but were used to illustrate key points as well as gather additional background information and insights.

### 3. Comparative analysis: traditional resources

In this section, we draw on the data collected to identify and examine the key resources enjoyed by faith-based as well as secular groups engaged with climate action. We begin by briefly reviewing “traditional” resources (material, human and organisational) before developing the idea of spiritual resources and how they might distinguish religious from secular groups. After introducing each resource, we apply them to both church and secular groups to draw out comparisons (depicted in Table 1).

Within RMT, *material resources* refer to fungible financial resources such as money, property, land or equipment. Secular and church groups share many traditional material resources. Both types of groups rely on access to funds to help pay staff, publicise and fund events and activities. For secular groups, these resources often include subscription membership, funds from private sponsorship or government grants. The key material resources available to Church groups included buildings and property (estates), income from national church organisations and, at times, government grants. For instance, ECS receives core funding from the Scottish Government. Moreover, some individual eco-congregations were recipients of the Scottish Government’s Climate Challenge Fund (CCF) which provides one-off grants to community-led projects designed to reduce carbon emissions.

The networks under investigation, including Operation Noah, also receive limited funds from donations and grants. Overall, however, the material resources available to church groups hoping to engage in environmental activities are minimal in absolute terms and especially in comparison with NGOs who dedicate significant resources to such environmental campaigns.

*Human resources* refer to members’ expertise, skills, labour, leadership or experience. Some writers refer to these as “human capital” (Iannaccone 1990). RMT literature suggests these human resources can be critical to collective action. For professional environmental NGOs, these resources usually take the form of paid campaigning and policy staff, though volunteers are also important. The human resources of church groups and networks are limited in comparison: while some members can bring management experience and expertise, these groups rarely have any staff dedicated to environmental action and rely almost entirely on volunteers. The input of church leaders (especially church ministers) is also potentially crucial but was by no means guaranteed in the groups studied.

In general terms, *social and organisational resources* refer to the organisational strength, communication and interaction within the group and between the group and wider public. A consistent theme in RMT is that pre-existing social interaction and networks amongst individuals facilitate the emergence, mobilisation and activities of movements (Della Porta and Diani 2006). Both secular and church groups studied rely heavily on such resources. Networking and interaction amongst secular groups active on environmental issues are highly developed and crucial to mobilisation (Bomberg

**Table 1.** Resources available for climate mobilisation.

Resource	Church congregations and networks	Secular
Material	Church contributions, grant income, land and buildings, but few dedicated to environmental projects	Member contributions: government grants, private donations. Funds almost entirely dedicated to environmental causes and campaigns
Human	Key leaders within church (including ministers), expertise of members of congregation (limited)	Paid professional staff, including organisers and experts, expertise of volunteers, charismatic speakers or celebrities
Organisational	Membership beyond traditional constituency of environmental group	Sophisticated networks and networking skills
Cultural	Spiritual – beliefs and values linked to Christian doctrine and faith	Belief in “rightness” of cause; symbols of wildlife, earth, degradation

While both types of groups draw on traditional (light grey) as well as cultural (dark grey) resources, church groups have fewer traditional resources devoted to climate mobilisation than do their secular counterparts.

2012). That interaction is greatly facilitated by formal networks such as Stop Climate Chaos or the Green 10 within the European Union. Although we found evidence of network ties amongst church groups as well (especially amongst eco-congregations, Operation Noah and A Rocha) church environmental networks tended to be looser and less developed than their secular counterparts.

Church congregations do, however, enjoy specific organisational resources linked to their faith. In RMT terms, the church is a “pre-formed” organisation with access to an untapped reservoir of members. Years ago McAdam (1982), noted how churches could provide the social interaction and communication networks necessary for mobilisation. Subsequent RMT research paid little attention to church or religious groups and their resources, but other analysis of religious groups identified dynamics crucial to our study of organisational resources. For instance, Ellingson, Woodley, and Paik’s (2012) study of US groups and Nita’s (2014) study of Christian and Muslim environmentalists found that that faith activists could exploit existing relationships with individuals or communities as well as form new relationships with other networks. Put another way, churches are social organisations originally created for non-movement purposes but “appropriable” for movement goals (McCarthy and Zald 2001) by recruiting volunteers or disseminating information. Recruitment of Scottish congregations to climate action may at first appear unlikely. Churches include a constituency not normally adhering to “activist identity” (Walker 2012, 56), and many church members reject outright the activist characterisation, preferring, in the words of Elisha (2011, 24) to identify as “humble servants of God”. Moreover, within the congregations we studied members rarely viewed themselves as traditional activists. As one insisted – “I would not consider myself politically active. I’m not one of those green types” (interview, 29 March 2015).<sup>8</sup> Yet our study identified clear “green action” (however labelled) amongst these groups, illustrated by a steady growth of eco-congregations and **their** rising awareness of climate change (as recognised by the Scottish Parliament) (2013), increased membership of faith-based networks (such as A Rocha) and an increase in energy saving or environmental activities of congregation members.<sup>9</sup> Thus we found that one distinctive organisational resource enjoyed by faith-based groups is their expanded potential constituency which includes individuals who might not otherwise engage with issues of climate or environment.

On the other hand, we need to be careful not to over-state the power of church-based organisational resources in the area of climate action (Taylor 2015). The link between church membership and more demanding political action beyond voting (such as joining initiatives or campaigns) remains weak overall (Harris 1994; Elisha 2011). Nor is there anything automatic about these church members’ adoption of wider campaign goals (in this case climate change aims). Moreover the church groups we studied were wary of diluting their message or identifying too closely with political groups: As one respondent noted: “We want to remain distinctive so that the faith element remains central” (interview, 22 May 2015). In short, more is needed to turn a “pre-formed” community into a climate active one.

We have established that church groups’ material, human and (to lesser extent) organisational resources are limited, especially compared to established secular environmental groups (see Table 1). This finding is not unexpected given the size and material disparity between the two types of group. But this finding does render more important church groups’ potential exploitation of other types of non-traditional resources. Below we draw on more recent RMT work which focuses on some less tangible cultural resources shaping climate mobilisation and action.

#### 4. Comparative analysis: cultural/spiritual resource

Several RMT scholars, especially those exploring civil rights, peace, LGBT or anti-nuclear campaigns, have identified how many movements draw not just on material/human resources outlined above but also on “intangibles” such as symbols and narratives which help encourage recruitment of new members or socialisation of existing ones. These “cultural resources” refer to the beliefs, values, identities and symbols of a group that “orient and facilitate their actions in everyday life”



(Edwards and Kane 2014, 215). This focus on cultural resources has revealed useful insights into NGO and social movement development. For instance, Banerjee and Steinberg (2015) show how such resources were employed by materially under-resourced communities engaged in collective mobilisation on local environmental issues. Or Edwards and Kane (2014, 216) note how environmental groups have borrowed cultural tropes, symbols and practices from earlier movements (such as civil rights) to maintain their “readiness and capacity” for collection action. Other scholars have analysed how environmental groups invoke potent symbols of the earth and nature but also frame environment and climate campaigns around a narrative of justice to increase their resonance (Hadden and Allan 2017). Although fewer scholars have examined the cultural resources of faith-based groups,<sup>10</sup> our examination revealed how faith-based groups can call on a distinctive cultural resource in the form of a powerful *faith-inspired* identity, comprised of shared values, beliefs, narratives, symbols and practices. In the context of climate action, these spiritual resources can facilitate the recruitment of new members and also, as McIntosh and Carmichael note (2015, 23), further mobilise those who already underpin their action with faith. Below we examine in more detail spiritual resources by breaking them down into three key components: the **shared values** (see Vonk 2012) linked to a distinctive world view; a shared powerful **narrative** on the Earth (and humans’ interaction with it) and a collection of **symbols and practices** undergirding such a narrative. Drawing on eco-theology literature as well as our interviews, news stories and websites, we examine each of these dimensions, highlighting what is distinctive and suggesting how these resources can motivate action.

#### 4.1. Shared values

The first value identified is that of love, awe and **respect for God’s creation**. This value is sometimes referred to creation care or stewardship (Kearns 1996; DeWitt 1998). Of course love and respect for earth is deeply engrained in secular environmental values. But distinct in eco-theology is the view of the Earth as part of God’s creation, and the belief that humans are to take care of it. Explicitly linking the Earth to part of God’s creation reminds us of the core of spirituality (the *interconnectedness* of all things) which can motivate strongly. Eco-Congregation Scotland, for instance, presents that link as their core principle, making clear that caring for the Earth is a “proper response to a loving creating God” while the Church of Scotland’s General Assembly (2009) notes that “climate change represents a failure in our stewardship of God’s creation.” The belief that human beings are separate and disconnected from nature is, according to many eco-theologians, precisely what has made global-scale degradation and pollution possible (Northcott 2013; Wolf 2010). The church actors we studied underlined that belief. To illustrate, one minister described humans’ stewardship responsibilities this way: “We need a new way of living, using the creativity of our intelligence *and* God’s spirit” (quoted in the *Guardian*, 17 June 2015).

The emphasis on creation care suggests a reinterpretation of the “dominion doctrine” found in Genesis 1:26–28.<sup>11</sup> ECS and other religious actors make clear that the doctrine is not about dominion to wreck or destroy, but to respect and protect. As one of our ECS ministers noted: “genuine spirituality engenders love ... stewardship is about connecting us to the Earth in a loving, caring relationship” (church service, August 2015). This value is not universally practised in the Christian church and we need to remember that religion can have different mobilising effects. In some churches (including some conservative Christian evangelical churches in the US), “dominion” is still seen by some as licence to exploit (e.g. Acton Institute 2000). But amongst the churches in our study, creation care was a powerful motivator, shifting its members away from exploitation and towards action to address climate change and environmental degradation.

A second core value motivating action is an ethical obligation, a **Christian sense of duty or responsibility** deriving from Christian teachings. Again, an emphasis on ethical obligation is in no way exclusive to Christianity, but faith can reinforce such beliefs because “As Christians we are accountable to God for what we do with our lives” (interview, 1 March 2015). The moderator of Church of Scotland’s synod illustrates this ethical motivation when expressing his delight with his



church's position on fossil fuel divestment campaigns: "They have taken affirmative action against climate change and put people and the planet at the heart of their decision making" (quoted in the *Guardian*, 30 March 2015). In the same vein, a Scottish chaplain directed his audience to the Scriptures, quoting Paul's exhortation to Philippians to "live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27) (sermon, April 2016). Particularly relevant to studies of environmental mobilisation is how this message shifts the emphasis away from consequentialist motivations for action (e.g. "I can make a tangible difference") to something deeper. Environmental action is taken not because an individual thinks she can change policy, but as an expression of shared values and principles. Kevin Durrant (2014) describes the motivation thus: "It's not that we shouldn't be spurred on by the hope of making a difference, it's just that our prime motivation needs to be to live out who we are". Note this focus is not just on the need for individual behavioural change (as pushed by NGOs or government exhortations urging lower energy use), but individual spiritual change – a "change of heart". As one minister noted in a sermon on climate action: "You can change the government, re-organise society ... till you're blue in the face – but until the heart is renewed, it's all futile" (sermon, June 2015). Another minister, writing on creation care and ethics, described Christian obligations to God's creation as "important firstly to enrich our spiritual relationship with God, and secondly, to motivate our righteous behaviour towards the earth" (Durrant 2014, 37).

Linked to Christian thinking on duty is the third value of **community**, especially a *just* community which is most explicitly noted in the biblical notion of "neighbour care" (Gospel of Matthew 22:35–39). As eco-theologian Gottlieb (2006, 243) notes "... we want to save the world, but right now we do what we do because we wish to be the kind of person who lives like this: who honors God's creation, feels and responds to the sacredness of the earth, and tries to love our neighbours as ourselves" (see also Wilkinson 2012, 135). This theme was manifest in all the church groups we studied, captured most cogently in their emphasis on the imperative of justice ("neighbour care") and recognition of the unjust effect of environmental degradation. Such a sentiment is evident in General Assembly proclamations: "the Church of Scotland is concerned that climate change poses a serious and immediate threat to people everywhere, particularly to the poor of the earth" (Church of Scotland 2009), while another church newsletter highlighted how "The burden of climate change often falls most heavily on the poorest in the world, those who have done the least to cause it". We observed these same sentiments in church congregations' position on fracking. A minister invoked justice concerns when noting fracking's possible adverse effects on local community and also on "those around the world who suffer most from the effects of climate change" (quoted in *The Herald*, 20 July 2013).

This focus on justice overlaps significantly with secular groups. While expressed differently (with little or no reference to community or neighbour care) secular groups also feature justice as a prominent theme (People and Planet 2014; WWF 2014, 2015). But the motivation for justice appears to be different; secular environment groups emphasise the consequentialist or more instrumental importance of including justice. These groups stress that successful collective climate action can only be achieved if the concerns of all are taken into account (see FoE Scotland 2015). By contrast, faith groups root that motivation as an article of faith deriving directly from the teachings of the Bible. Addressing injustice thus becomes an obligation *as a Christian*. As expressed by one church activist: "We'd like to think our [environmental] work is motivated by something deep, something spiritual ... . Eco-work is a way to carry out our wider mission" (interview, 22 May 2015).

In sum, notions of creation care, Christian duty and community care (justice) are core motivating values. These same values, in secular form, also serve to motivate secular groups. What is distinct is how, for church-based groups, these values were not just linked to care for the earth, or a belief they can change policy, or hope that such values can facilitate collective action. Rather, for our groups these motivating values emerged directly from – and were strengthened by – Christian faith, obligations and teachings.

## 4.2. Shared climate narrative

These groups' religious identity and values together provide a **shared story or narrative** (see Lejano, Ingram, and Ingram 2013) on issues linked to the environment, climate change and the relationship between humans and earth. RMT theorists note in particular how a shared narrative can help motivate action and also strengthen group stability. From earlier movement research, we can also assume groups with shared meanings tend to be more stable and successful (Wood 1994). A narrative provides the "glue" binding people together; by providing a sense of common goals, it enables communities to take action even in face of daunting challenges such as climate change (Lejano, Ingram, and Ingram 2013; see also Middlemiss 2011).

To explore this narrative – and also examine the extent to which it is distinctive – we supplemented our news analysis and observations with a systematic comparison of church and secular groups' website mentions of climate change, including references to its causes, characteristics and solutions.<sup>12</sup> We identified the 12 most common words and phrases occurring in pages linked to climate. A simple way of depicting these key messages is by a comparative word cloud (see Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> The comparison reveals that faith-based groups share with secular groups a broad concern with climate change, a recognition of its urgency, its anthropogenic source and the need to engage at an individual and collective level. Also present amongst both sets of groups is a keen awareness of the profound justice implications of climate change. (References to "justice" were amongst the most cited concept for both church and secular groups.) This overlap may in part be explained by some overlap of group membership.<sup>14</sup> However we noted several differences in both emphasis and key words. Secular groups were more likely to emphasise not just urgency but a more apocalyptic language, highlighting the disastrous effects of fossil fuel extraction pushing the world "further towards catastrophic climate change" (FoE 2016). Also evident was a focus on greed and neoliberal causes of climate devastation (see Figure 1).

Church groups emphasised two distinct components. First, we found their climate narrative was infused with the notion of **hope**, healing and redemption. Specific reference to "hope" was evident in websites studied, but so too were related notions of redemption and transformation which are core to Christian teaching (see Clifton-Soderstrom 2009; Northcott 2009, 69–70). This emphasis was also evident amongst our interviewees who, when asked to characterise their work, noted: "We look for hope where we can find it. Doom and gloom doesn't work very well though there's plenty of it around" (interview, 29 March 2015). Or as one of our interviewed ministers noted, when describing his parishioners' pledge to walk rather than drive to church: "on the global scale, your [pledge] might seem like spitting in the wind of global warming – and yet it will mean everything, for it says I will not give in to you, despair and resignation; I'm a child of God" (sermon, 30 November 2014). This finding echoes work by Baker and Skinner (2006, 14), whose research on city regeneration also concluded faith communities brought "a vision and hope" that transcended any government promise of community support or action.



**Figure 1.** Climate Reference Word Clouds. Key: The word cloud on the left depicts key phrases appearing on relevant website pages of churches and faith-based organisations. The image on the right depicts phrases from secular environmental NGOs.

Second, we noted a stronger **temporal element** amongst our church groups' narratives, specifically greater reference to various interconnections across time. In particular, our website analysis of church groups revealed greater emphasis on intergenerational themes, especially the intergenerational ethics of climate change (see [Figure 1](#)). The ECS website, for instance, states its vision is to create "A Scotland that cares for God's creation now and in the future" (ECS 2015; see also Church of Scotland 2015). Our interviews also underlined this theme. One church member who was also involved with secular groups noted that environmental groups think much less about the past. "Their main concern is how can we change *now*; how can we change the future before disaster strikes". By contrast, "the church is steeped in the past: it looks back and forwards, it offers different paths or entry points to thinking about environment, climate, future and the past" (interview, church member, 1 April 2015). In sum the church groups' narrative on climate encompasses not only temporal notions of creation and eternity but also transformation, redemption and hope.

### 4.3. Shared symbols and practices

Shared symbols and practices undergird the shared narrative outlined above. Social movement scholars show how groups may call on a broad range of symbols, frames, music and repertoires of protest to strengthen and communicate their narrative (McGurty 2009). The cultural repertoire of environmental NGOs is well known, including traditional and imaginative protest, readily identified symbols of melting ice caps and stranded polar bears, and starker images of natural devastation (see Atanasova and Kotevko 2015). Our comparative website data revealed secular groups' greater emphasis on apocalyptic symbols (e.g. ticking bombs, clock hands nearing midnight), and symbols of greed and injustice (through, for instance, a visual portrayal of climate change victims in developing countries). The overall message conveyed by the core symbols is stark: time is short, our way of life is to blame and the damage is devastating.

In the church groups studied, climate symbols and practices were often different. Church members share cultural resources by virtue of participating in common religious traditions and rituals. That shared meaning, rooted in history and tradition, can help underscore some of the messages above (redemption, hope, healing and continuity). But as theologian Ruether (2011) notes, Christians are more likely to be mobilised if they find support in traditions that carry more specific local meaning and authority for them. For the eco-congregations studied, the link between abstract Christian values and practices "on the ground" was crucial. An innovative example is "climate offerings" whereby parishioners put in the collection plate their "carbon savings" – an example of what they had done that week to reduce carbon. Similarly, local harvest festivals are increasingly used to celebrate and praise the wonders of nature generally. Another example featured in news stories was the ECS climate baton which traversed through churches across Scotland before arriving (by train) in Paris for the 2015 UN climate negotiations. Crafted from a recycled church pew, its message "Time for Climate Justice: Churches in Scotland Demand a Deal in Paris" invoked not only urgency but also justice. Other church practices acted as carriers of shared meaning, including hymns and stewardship gardens. We noted how these symbolic actions often took different forms than those taken by secular groups. Rather than action leading to protest or targeting of neoliberal practices, structures of government or corporate greed, church actions often took a more understated form of reflection and "bearing witness", what McIntosh (2008) calls "otherworldly ways of knowing, being and doing". Said one: "We don't want to come across as too political" (interview church member, June 2015).

## 5. Conclusion: implications and further research

We have sought to explain how and why Christian church communities mobilise on environmental issues, and what – if anything – is distinctive about that mobilisation. Adopting an RMT framework focused our attention on the role of various resources and how they shape mobilisation. We began by comparing "traditional" resources of both church and secular groups. We suggested

church groups rely on a comparatively weak set of material, human and organisational resources, but can draw on a set of cultural resources linked to Christian beliefs, values and symbols. Our study did not reveal anything *intrinsic* to faith groups that render them more mobilised or politically active. We need to remember that religion can have a number of effects on political mobilisation, facilitating but also hindering action.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, in the cases we studied church congregations drew on a set of cultural resources linked specifically to their religious identity. We suggested how these “spiritual resources” – including a desire to protect God’s creation (stewardship or creation care), a deep sense of duty and responsibility, and an emphasis on community – provided a potentially powerful “transcendent” narrative (Smith 1996) and strong imperative of climate justice and action.

To find out what was distinctive we compared church groups’ climate narrative with the narrative and practices of secular groups. We found that both church and secular groups call on a rich repository of symbols, narratives and practices. Both groups share a broad concern with climate change, a recognition of the need to engage at an individual and collective level, and an awareness of the profound justice implications of climate change. But church groups bring a distinct set of values, a different climate narrative and different rituals/symbols underlying climate action. Whereas secular groups more often invoke protest repertoires and rely on symbols of wildlife, earth and its destruction, church narratives and practices put a heavier emphasis on spiritual hope, creation care and “neighbour care”; they made greater reference to the past (and temporal interconnections), tradition and the use of ritual; they were less likely to invoke symbols of uncertainty, greed or catastrophe. The comparison suggests Christian church congregations understand climate differently and also have a different way of interacting with the issue. In particular, church groups’ mobilisation was more understated and politically circumspect.

These findings have several possible implications for our understanding of activism and policy. First, we need to look for activism in non-traditional places; a significant amount of environment and climate activity occurs outside the environmental NGO or political party sphere. Climate action in Christian congregations also involves different demographic constituencies than the average NGO activist.<sup>16</sup> Because church group engagement tends to be less conspicuous, with a gentler rhetorical approach, its presence may not be as readily apparent to scholars of mobilisation or activism. Yet their commitment, and “reach” – including into as yet untapped constituencies – is deep.

One of the most potent motivations for church groups was their focus on hope and redemption which contrasted with the more apocalyptic imagery and messages of some secular groups. Research on climate communication (Marshall 2014; Moser 2016) suggests that the enormity of the climate challenge can stymie action. Whereas fear may paralyse, hope can empower when a challenge is daunting. Our study found that spiritual resources include considerable reserves of hope which groups can use to motivate themselves and others. In a similar vein, our study underscored how religious meaning can provide a way to interpret uncertainty surrounding climate (see Bancroft 2014, 250; Wolffe and Moorhead 2014). In particular, church groups’ temporally grounded narrative can provide adherents with a way to deal with the long term, uncertain nature of climate change. These findings could have significant implications for how groups and policymakers seek to bring the public on board, change behaviour or transition to a low carbon world (see CAT 2017).

A final implication concerns cooperation and collaboration. Despite differences, our comparison underlined shared, broad aims and much scope for collaboration and interaction. Some of this cooperation already occurs within wider coalitions such as Stop Climate Chaos in Scotland which brought together diverse groups in their campaigns surrounding the Climate Act or the 2015 Paris UN climate negotiations. But our study suggests much more collaboration is possible provided other resources – such as leadership and networking – are employed.

### 5.1. Future research

The findings presented here are not meant to be definitive but rather are intended to form part of wider comparison and study. We are aware that a focus on resource mobilisation narrows the

discussion of how and why these groups mobilise. We thus suggest several ways our study can provide a useful starting point for further, wider research. First we sought to fill a gap left by social movement and RMT scholars who generally have neglected the role of religious actors and their growing activity in the area of environment and climate. Conversely, religious and theological studies scholars don't often look to mobilisation or social movement approaches. While interdisciplinary frameworks are inevitably tricky, we have shown they can yield new insights. We invite further collaborative efforts.

Second, we focused on cases in one country only and would welcome cross-national comparisons and data to identify and explore the role of national and cultural differences. Similarly our cases focused on church congregations and networks that explicitly and enthusiastically drew on their religious faith and beliefs as a resource which could help them understand, address and mobilise around climate. As mentioned above, not all church groups are so mobilised or interested. A larger study, comparing active and inactive church groups, would be a useful way to tease out the conditions under which spiritual resources are a powerful "climate mobiliser", and when they are not. A related avenue of research could include cross-faith comparisons which could help us tease out the role of spiritual resources and their application. Building on the work of Nita (2014), Veldman, Szasz, and Haluza-DeLay (2014) and other comparative studies, future research could examine if different faiths rely on a different sort or mix of resources and, if so, with what implications.

Finally, while spiritual resources are important they do not *alone* explain motivation and action – the latter is undoubtedly the consequence of several different resources and their interaction. That dynamic is well worth exploring in future research. It may be useful to characterise spiritual resources as a "raw" resource which may not directly translate into specific climate action but, when combined with other resources (including, say, leadership, organisational skills, networks), can lead to environmental activities distinctly motivated and distinctly practised at the individual and community level. Further research focusing on the interaction of resources would reveal a fuller understanding of why faith-based environmental activity is growing and how it might be explained.

## Notes

1. There are some significant exceptions, especially those writing on African American churches (see Wood 1994; Harris 1994).
2. Mobilisation refers here to galvanising group action to pursue collective goals, in this case goals linked to combating climate change (Bomberg 2012).
3. Some theorists also added broader contextual factors, such as government structure and ease of access to policy-makers (Zald and McCarthy 1987). These are important factors but stretch beyond a focus on resources and are better captured with other frameworks such as political opportunity structures or institutionalism.
4. See also social scientists such as Putnam (2000) and Ammerman (1997) who underline the importance of religious communities as sources of social capital.
5. The relationship is captured well by McIntosh and Carmichael who evoke the botanical metaphor of vines. Religion is spirituality 'tied down' and integrated into social structures, a 'human-made trellis' (2015, 29).
6. These are all internationally active Christian NGOs based in the UK and engaged in environmental and climate action. See A Rocha (<http://arocha.org.uk>), Christian Aid (<http://www.christianaid.org.uk>) and Operation Noah (<http://operationnoah.org>).
7. The congregations included three Edinburgh churches: the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart, Saughtonhall United Reformed Church and Wardie Parish Church (Church of Scotland, CoS). Other churches studied include St Michael's Parish Church, Linlithgow (CoS); St Andrews Episcopal Church, St Andrews (Scottish Episcopal Church); St Columba, Stirling (CoS); Mayfield Salisbury Parish Church (CoS), Edinburgh. Transition Scotland group interviews and observations included members of Transition groups in Linlithgow, St Andrews and Edinburgh, as well as the Transition Scotland Network meetings and activities.
8. The reverse is also often true: secular activists can be wary of working with 'religious' folk (Nita 2014, 232).
9. Beginning with a handful of churches in 2001, Eco-Congregation Scotland now includes over 400 congregations. Well over 100 of these have won awards based on demonstrable achievements in, *inter alia*, energy saving at home and in church buildings, biodiversity conservation, community outreach and environmental education. Details of their activities and growth are here: <http://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/about-us/story/>.
10. Exceptions include Snyder and Scandrett 2011.

11. Genesis 1: 26–28 reads: Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' ... 28 God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.
12. We manually coded pages from around 30 websites, identifying key words and themes linked to climate. We performed textual analysis of climate-related website pages of: EcoCongregation Scotland; A Rocha; Christian Aid, Operation Noah, Friends of the Earth Scotland, People and Planet Scotland, WWF Scotland, Transition Scotland. The word clouds were created using NVivo word frequency query (word cloud tab).
13. For the use and limits of word cloud analysis see Metze (2017).
14. While the precise extent of the overlap is not known, some of our interviewees were members of environmental NGOs such as WWF or RSPB. The RSPB reports that nearly 20% of their supporters are regular worshippers or church goers (see RSPB 2013).
15. For instance, scholars of African American history have noted the religious served as an 'otherworldly' solace for temporal ills which tended to encourage political apathy rather than engagement (Harris 1994, 42–43).
16. The most active members of NGOs tend to be younger than the average population of church members (the largest age cohort of latter is the 'over 65s') (see Sedghi 2013).

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